Social Ecology versus Deep Ecology: A Challenge for the Ecology Movement

Murray Bookchin

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The environmental movement has traveled a long way since those early Earth Day festivals when millions of school kids were ritualistically mobilized to clean up streets, while Arthur Godfrey, Barry Commoner, Paul Ehrlich, and a bouquet of manipulative legislators scolded their parents for littering the landscape with cans, newspapers, and bottles.

The movement has gone beyond a naïve belief that patchwork reforms and solemn vows by EPA bureaucrats to act more resolutely will seriously arrest the insane pace at which we are tearing down the planet. This shopworn Earth Day approach to engineering nature so that we can ravage the Earth with minimal effect on ourselves — an approach that I called environmentalism in the late 1960s, in contrast to social ecology — has shown signs of giving way to a more searching and radical mentality. Today the new word in vogue is ecology — be it deep ecology, human ecology, biocentric ecology, antihumanist ecology, or to use a term that is uniquely rich in meaning, social ecology.

Happily, the new relevance of ecology reveals a growing dissatisfaction among thinking people with attempts to use our vast ecological problems for cheaply spectacular and politically manipulative ends. As our forests disappear due to mindless cutting and increasing acid rain, as the ozone layer thins out because of the widespread use of fluorocarbons, as toxic dumps multiply all over the planet, as highly dangerous, often radioactive pollutants enter into our air, water, and food chains — all, and innumerable other hazards that threaten the integrity of life itself, raise far more basic issues than any that can be resolved by Earth Day clean-ups and faint-hearted changes in existing environmental laws.

For good reason, more and more people are trying to go beyond the vapid environmentalism of the early 1970s and develop a more fundamental, indeed a more radical, approach to the ecological crises that beleaguer us. They are looking for an ecological approach, one that is rooted in an ecological philosophy, ethics, sensibility, and image of nature, and ultimately for an ecological movement that will transform our domineering market society into a nonhierarchical cooperative society — a society that will live in harmony with nature because its members live in harmony with one another.

They are beginning to sense that there is a tie-in between the way people deal with one another, the way they behave as social beings — men with women, old with young, rich with poor, whites with people of color, First World with Third, elites with "masses" — and the way they deal with nature.

The question that now faces us is: What do we really mean by an ecological approach? What are a coherent ecological philosophy, ethics, and movement? How can the answers to these questions and many others fit together so that they form a meaningful and creative whole?

Just as the earlier environmental movement was filled with well-meaning spokesmen like Arthur Godfrey who sold detergents over television while driving "environmentally" sound electric cars, so today the newly emerging ecological movement is filled with well-meaning people who are riddled by a new kind of "spokesmen," individuals who are selling their own wares — usually academic and personal careers.

If we are not to repeat the mistakes of the early 1970s with their hoopla about "population control," their latent antifeminism, their elitism, their arrogance, and their ugly authoritarian tendencies, we must honestly and seriously appraise the new tendencies that today are going under the name of one or another form of ecology.

Two Conflicting Tendencies

Let us agree from the outset that ecology is no magic term that unlocks the secret of our abuse of nature. It is a word that can be as easily abused, distorted, and tainted as democracy and freedom. Nor does ecology put us all — whoever "we" may be — in the same boat against environmentalists, who are simply trying to make a rotten society work by dressing it in green leaves and colorful flowers while ignoring the deep-seated roots of our ecological problems.

It is time to honestly fact the fact that there are differences within today's so-called ecology movement that are as serious as those between the environmentalism and ecologism of the early 1970s. There are barely disguised racists, survivalists, macho Daniel Boones, and outright social reactionaries who use the word ecology to express their views, just as there are deeply concerned naturalists, communitarians, social radicals, and feminists who use the word ecology to express theirs.

The differences between these two tendencies consist not only of quarrels with regard to theory, sensibility, and ethics. They have far-reaching practical and political consequences. They concern not only of the way we view nature, or humanity; or even ecology, but how we propose to change society and by what means.

The greatest differences that are emerging within the so-called ecology movement are between a vague, formless, often self-contradictory, and invertebrate thing called deep ecology and a long-developing, coherent, and socially oriented body of ideas that can best be called social ecology. Deep ecology has parachuted into our midst quite recently from the Sunbelt's bizarre mix of Hollywood and Disneyland, spiced with homilies from Taoism, Buddhism, spiritualism, reborn Christianity, and in some cases eco-fascism, while social ecology draws its inspiration from such outstanding radical decentralist thinkers as Peter Kropotkin, William Morris, and Paul Goodman, among many others who have advanced a serious challenge to the present society with its vast hierarchical, sexist, class-ruled, statist apparatus and militaristic history.

Let us face these differences bluntly: deep ecology, despite all its social rhetoric, has virtually no real sense that our ecological problems have their ultimate roots in society and in social problems. It preaches a gospel of a kind of "original sin" that accurses a vague species called humanity — as though people of color were equatable with whites, women with men, the Third World with the First, the poor with the rich, and the exploited with their exploiters.

Deep ecologists see this vague and undifferentiated humanity essentially as an ugly "anthropocentric" thing — presumably a malignant product of natural evolution — that is "overpopulating" the planet, "devouring" its resources, and destroying its wildlife and the biosphere — as though some vague domain of "nature" stands opposed to a constellation of nonnatural human beings, with their technology, minds, society, etc. Deep ecology, formulated largely by privileged male white academics, has managed to bring sincere naturalists like Paul Shepard into the same company as patently antihumanist and macho mountain men like David Foreman of Earth First! who preach a gospel that humanity is some kind of cancer in the world of life.

It was out of this kind of crude eco-brutalism that Hitler, in the name of "population control," with a racial orientation, fashioned theories of blood and soil that led to the transport of millions of people to murder camps like Auschwitz. The same eco-brutalism now reappears a half-century later among self-professed deep ecologists who believe that Third World peoples should be permitted to starve to death and that desperate Indian immigrants from Latin America should be exclude by the border cops from the United States lest they burden "our" ecological resources.

This eco-brutalism does not come out of Hitler's Mein Kampf. It appeared in Simply Living, an Australian periodical, as part of a laudatory interview of David Foreman by Professor Bill Devall, who co-authored Deep Ecology with Professor George Sessions, the authorized manifesto of the deep ecology movement. Foreman, who exuberantly expressed his commitment to deep ecology, frankly informed Devall that "When I tell people who the worst thing we could do in Ethiopia is to give aid — the best thing would be to just let nature seek its own balance, to let the people there just starve — they think this is monstrous… Likewise, letting the USA be an overflow valve for problems in Latin America is not solving a thing. It's just putting more pressure on the resources we have in the USA."

One can reasonably ask such compelling questions as what does it mean for nature to "seek its own balance" in East Africa, where agribusiness, colonialism, and exploitation have ravaged a once culturally and ecologically stable area. Or who is this all-American "our" that owns "the resources we have in the USA"? Are they the ordinary people who are driven by sheer need to cut timber, mine ores, and operate nuclear power plants? Or are they the giant corporations that are not only wrecking the good old USA but have produced the main problems these days in Latin America that send largely Indian folk across the Rio Grande? As an ex-Washington lobbyist and political huckster, David Foreman need not be expected to answer these subtle questions in a radical way. But what is truly surprising is the reaction — more precisely, the lack of any reaction — that marked Professor Devall's behavior. Indeed, the interview was notable for the laudatory, almost reverential, introduction and description of Foreman that Devall prepared.

What Is Deep Ecology?

Deep ecology is so much of a black hole of half-digested, ill-formed, and half-baked ideas that one can easily express utterly vicious notions like Foreman's and still sound like a fiery radical who challenges everything that is anti-ecological in the present realm of ideas. The very words deep ecology, in fact, clue is into the fact that we are not dealing with a body of clear ideas but with a bottomless pit in which vague notions and moods of all kinds can be such into the depths of an ideological toxic dump.

Does it make sense, for example, to counterpose deep ecology with superficial ecology, as though the word ecology were applicable to everything that involves environmental issues? Given this mindless use of ecology to describe anything of a biospheric nature, does it not completely degrade the rich meaning of the word ecology to append words like shallow and deep to it — adjectives that may be more applicable to gauging the depth of a cesspool than the depth of ideas? Arne Naess, the pontiff of deep ecology, who inflicted this vocabulary upon us, together with George Sessions and Bill Devall, who have been marketing it out of Ecotopia, have taken a pregnant word — ecology — and deprived it of any inner meaning and integrity by designating the most pedestrian environmentalists as ecologists, albeit shallow ones, in contrast to their notion of deep.

This is not mere wordplay. It tells us something about the mindset that exists among these "deep" thinkers. To parody the words shallow and deep ecology is to show not only the absurdity of this vocabulary but to reveal the superficiality of its inventors. Is there perhaps a deeper ecology than deep ecology? What is the deepest ecology of all that gives ecology its full due as a philosophy, sensibility, ethics, and movement for social change?

This kind of absurdity tells us more than we realize about the confusion Naess-Sessions-Devall, not to speak of eco-brutalists like Foreman, have introduced into the current ecology movement as it grew beyond the earlier environmental movement of the 1970s. Indeed, the Naess-Sessions-Devall trio rely very heavily upon the ease with which people forget the history of the ecology movement, the way in which the same wheel is reinvented every few years by newly arrived individuals who, well meaning as they may be, often accept a crude version of highly developed ideas that appeared earlier in time. At best, these crudities merely echo in very unfinished form a corpus of views that were once presented in a richer context and tradition of ideas. At worst, they shatter such contexts and traditions, picking out tasty pieces that become utterly distorted when they reappear in an utterly alien framework. No regard is paid by such "deep thinkers" to the fact that the new context in which an idea is placed may utterly change the meaning of the idea itself. German National Socialism, which came to power in the Third Reich in 1933, was militantly "anticapitalist" and won many of its adherents from the German Social Democratic and Communist parties because of its anticapitalist denunciations. But its anticapitalism was placed in a strongly racist, imperialist, and seemingly naturalist context that extolled wilderness, sociobiology (the word had yet to be invented, but its "morality of the gene," to use E. O. Wilson's delicious expression, and its emphasis on "racial memory" to use William Irwin Thompson's Jungian expression), and antirationalism, features one finds in latent or explicit form in Sessions and Devall's Deep Ecology.1

Note well that neither Naess, Sessions, nor Devall has written a single line about decentralization, a nonhierarchical society, democracy, small-scale communities, local autonomy, mutual aid, communalism, and tolerance that was not worked out in painstaking detail and brilliantly contextualized into a unified and coherent outlook by Peter Kropotkin a century ago and his admirers from the 1930s to the 1960s in our own time. Great movements in Europe and an immense literature followed from these writers' works — anarchist movements, I may add, like the Iberian Anarchist Federation in Spain, a tradition that is being unscrupulously red-baited by certain self-styled Greens as "leftist" and eco-anarchist. When George Sessions was asked at a recent ecofeminist conference about the differences between deep ecology and social ecology, he identified it as one between spiritualism and Marxism — this, a particularly odious and conscious falsehood!

But what the boys from Ecotopia proceed to do is to totally recontextualize the framework of these ideas, bringing in personalities and notions that basically change their radical libertarian thrust. Deep Ecology mingles Woody Guthrie, a Communist Party centralist who no more believed in decentralization than did Stalin (whom he greatly admired until his physical deterioration and death), with Paul Goodman, an anarchist who would have been mortified to be place din the same tradition with Guthrie (18). In philosophy, Spinoza, a Jew in spirit if not in religious commitment, is intermingled with Heidegger, a former member of the Nazi Party in spirit as well as ideological affiliation — all in the name of a vague "process philosophy." Almost opportunistic in their use of catchwords and what George Orwell called doublespeak, "process philosophy" makes it possible for Sessions-Devall to add Alfred North Whitehead to their list of ideological ancestors because he called his ideas "processual," although he would have differed profoundly from Heidegger, who earned his academic spurs in the Third Reich by repudiating his Jewish teacher, notably Edmund Husserl, in an ugly and shameful way.

One could go on indefinitely with this sloppy admixture of "ancestors," philosophical traditions, social pedigrees, and religions that often have nothing in common with one another and,

properly conceived, are commonly in sharp opposition with one another. Thus a repellent reactionary like Thomas Malthus and the neo-Malthusian tradition he spawned is celebrated with the same enthusiasm in Deep Ecology as Henry Thoreau, a radical libertarian who fostered a highly humanistic tradition. Eclecticism would be too mild a word for this kind of hodgepodge, one that seems shrewdly calculated to embrace everyone under the rubric of deep ecology who is prepared to reduce ecology to a religion rather than a systematic and deeply critical body of ideas. But behind all this is a pattern. The kind of "ecological" thinking that enters into the book seems to surface in an appendix called "Ecosophy T" by Arne Naess, who regales us with flow diagrams and corporate-type tables of organization that have more in common with logical positivist forms of exposition (Naess, in fact, was an acolyte of this repellent school of thought for years) than anything that could be truly called organic philosophy.

If we look beyond the spiritual "Eco-la-la" (to use a word coined by a remarkable ecofeminist, Chaia Heller), and examine the context in which demands like decentralization, small-scale communities, local autonomy, mutual aid, communalism, and tolerance are placed, the blurred images that Sessions and Devall create come into clearer focus. Decentralism, small-scale communities, local autonomy, even mutual aid and communalism are not intrinsically ecological or emancipatory. Few societies were more decentralized than European feudalism, which in fact was structured around small-scale communities, mutual aid, and the communal use of land. Local autonomy was highly prized and autarchy formed the economic key to feudal communities. Yet few societies were more hierarchical. Looming over medieval serfs, who were tied to the land by an "ecological" network of rights and duties that placed them on a status only slightly above that of slaves, were status groups that extended from villeins to barons, counts, dukes, and rather feeble monarchies. The manorial economy of the Middle Ages placed a high premium on autarchy or "self-sufficiency" and spirituality. Yet oppression was often intolerable, and the great mass of people who belonged to that society lived in utter subjugation to their "betters" and the nobility.

If nature-worship, with its bouquet of wood sprites, animistic fetishes, fertility rites, and other such ceremonies, magicians, shamans and shamanesses, animal deities, goddesses and gods that presumably reflect nature and its forces — if all, taken together, pave the way to an ecological sensibility and society, then it is hard to understand how ancient Egypt managed to become and remain one of the most hierarchical and oppressive societies in the ancient world. The pantheon of ancient Egyptian deities is filled with animal and part-animal, part-human deities with all-presiding goddesses as well as gods. Indeed, the Nile River, which provided the "life-giving" waters of the valley, was used in a highly ecological manner. Yet the entire society was structured around the oppression of millions of serfs and opulent nobles, a caste system so fixed, exploitative, and deadening to the human spirit that one wonders how notions of spirituality can be given priority over the need for a critical evaluation of society and the need to restructure it.

That there were material beneficiaries of this spiritual Eco-la-la becomes clear enough in accounts of the priestly corporations that "communally" owned the largest tracts of land in Egyptian society. With a highly domesticated, spiritually passive, yielding, and will-less population — schooled for centuries in "flowing with the Nile," to coin a phrase — the Egyptian ruling strata indulged themselves in an orgy of exploitation and power for centuries.

Even if one grants the need for a new sensibility and outlook — a point that has been made repeatedly in the literature of social ecology — one can look behind even this limited context of deep ecology to a still broader context: the love affair of deep ecology with Malthusian doctrines, a

spirituality that emphasizes self-effacement, a flirtation with a supernaturalism that stands in flat contradiction to the refreshing naturalism that ecology has introduced into social theory; eruptions of a crude positivism in the spirit of Naess that works against a truly organic dialectic so needed to understand development, not merely bumper-sticker slogans; and a regular tendency to become unfocused, replacing ideas with moods, when Devall, for example, encounters a macho mountain man like Foreman. We shall see that all the bumper-sticker demands like decentralization, small-scale communities, local autonomy, mutual aid, communalism, tolerance, and even an avowed opposition to hierarchy go awry when placed in a larger context of Malthusian antihumanism and orgies about "biocentrism," which marks the authentic ideological infrastructure of deep ecology.

The Art of Evading Society

The seeming ideological tolerance that deep ecology celebrates has a sinister function of its own. It not only reduces richly nuanced ideas and conflicting traditions to their lowest common denominator; it legitimates extremely regressive, primitivistic, and even highly reactionary notions that gain respectability because they are buried in the company of authentically radical contexts and traditions.

Consider, for example, the "broader definition of community (including animals, plants); intuition of organic wholeness" with which Devall and Sessions regale their menu of "Dominant and Minority" positions (18–19). Nothing could seem more wholesome, more innocent of guile, than this "we are all one" bumper-sticker slogan. What the reader may not notice is that this all-encompassing definition of community erases all the rich and meaningful distinctions that exist not only between animal and plant communities but above all between nonhuman and human communities. If community is to be broadly defined as a universal "whole," then a unique function that natural evolution has conferred on human society dissolves into a cosmic night that lacks differentiation, variety, and a wide array of functions. The fact is that human communities are consciously formed communities — that is to say, societies with an enormous variety of institutions, cultures that can be handed down from generation to generation, lifeways that can be radically changed for the better or worse, technologies that can be redesigned, innovated, or abandoned, and social, gender, ethnic, and hierarchical distinctions that can be vastly altered according to changes in consciousness and historical development. Unlike most so-called "animal societies" or, for that matter, communities, human societies are not instinctively formed or genetically programmed. Their destinies may be decided by factors — generally economic and cultural — that are beyond human control at times, to be sure; but what is particularly unique about human societies is that they can be racially changed by their members — and in ways that can be made to benefit the natural world as well as the human species.

Human society, in fact, constitutes a "second nature," a cultural artifact, out of "first nature," or primeval nonhuman nature. There is nothing wrong, unnatural, or ecologically alien about this fact. Human society, like plant and animal communities, is in large part a product of natural evolution, no less than beehives or anthills. It is a product, moreover, of the human species, a species that is no less a product of nature than whales, dolphins, California condors, or prokaryotic cells. Second nature is also a product of mind — of a brain that can think in a richly conceptual manner and produce a highly symbolic form of communication. Taken together, second nature,

the human species that forms it, and the richly conceptual form of thinking and communication so distinctive to it, emerges out of natural evolution no less than any other life-form and nonhuman community. This second nature is uniquely different from first nature in that it can act thinkingly, purposefully, willfully, and depending up on the society we examine, creatively in the best ecological sense or destructively in the worst ecological sense. Finally, this second nature called society has its own history: its long process of grading out of first nature, of organizing or institutionalizing human relationships, human interactions, conflicts , distinctions, and richly nuanced cultural formations, and of actualizing its large number of potentialities — some eminently creative, others eminently destructive.

Finally, a cardinal feature of this product of natural evolution called society is its capacity to intervene in first nature — to alter it, again in ways that may be eminently creative or destructive. But the capacity of human beings to deal with first nature actively, purposefully, willfully, rationally, and one hopes ecologically is no less a product of evolution than the capacity of large herbivores to keep forests from eating away at grasslands or of earthworms to aerate the soil. Human beings and their societies alter first nature at best in a rational and ecological way — or at worst in an irrational and anti-ecological way. But the fact that they are constituted to act upon nature, to intervene in natural processes, to alter them in one way or another, is no less a product of natural evolution than the action of any life-form on its environment.

In failing to emphasize the uniqueness, characteristics, and functions of human societies, or placing them in natural evolution as part of the development of life, or giving full, indeed unique due to human consciousness as a medium for the self-reflective role of human thought as nature rendered self-conscious, deep ecologists essentially evade the social roots of the ecological crisis. They stand in marked distinction to writers like Kropotkin who outspokenly challenged the gross inequities in society that underpin the disequilibrium between society and nature. Deep ecology contains no history of the emergence of society out of nature, a crucial development that brings social theory into organic contact with ecological theory. It presents no explanation of — indeed, it reveals no interest in — the emergence of hierarchy out of society, of classes out of hierarchy, of the State out of classes — in short, the highly graded social as well as ideological development that gets to the roots of the ecological problem in the social domination of women by men and of men by other men, ultimately giving rise to the notion of dominating nature in the first place.

Instead, what deep ecology gives us, apart from what it plagiarizes from radically different ideological contexts, is a deluge of Eco-la-la. Humanity surfaces in a vague and unearthly form to embrace everyone in a realm of universal guilt. We are then massaged into sedation with Buddhist and Taoist homilies about self-abnegation, biocentrism, and pop spiritualism that verges on the supernatural — this for a subject-matter, ecology, whose very essence is a return to earthy naturalism. We not only lose sight of the social and the differences that fragment humanity in to a host of human beings — men and women, ethnic groups, oppressors and oppressed; we lose sight of the individual self in an unending flow of Eco-la-la that preaches the "realization of self-in Self where ÔSelf' stands for organic wholeness" (67). That a cosmic "Self" is created that is capitalized should not deceive us into believing that it has any more reality than an equally cosmic "Humanity." More of the same cosmic Eco-la-la appears when we are informed that "the phrase Ôone' includes not only men, an individual human, but all humans, grizzly bears, whole rainforest ecosystems, mountains and rivers, the tiniest microbes in the soil and so on."

A “Self” so cosmic that it has to be capitalized is no real self at all. It is an ideological category as vague, faceless, and depersonalized as the very patriarchal image of “man” that dissolves our uniqueness and rationality into a deadening abstraction.

On Selfhood and Viruses

Such flippant abstractions of human individuality are extremely dangerous. Historically, a “self” that absorbs all real existential selves has been used from time immemorial to absorb individual uniqueness and freedom into a supreme individual who heads the State, churches of various sorts, adoring congregations — be they Eastern or Western — and spellbound constituencies, however much a “self” is dressed up in ecological, naturalistic, and biocentric attributes. The Paleolithic shaman regaled in reindeer skins and horns is the predecessor of the Pharaoh, the institutionalized Buddha, and in more recent times Hitler, Stalin, and Mussolini.

That the egotistical, greedy, and soloist bourgeois self has always been a repellent being goes without saying, and deep ecology as personified by Devall and Sessions make the most of it. This kind of “critical” stance is easy to adopt; it can even find a place in People magazine. But is there not a free, independently minded, ecologically concerned, indeed idealist self with a unique personality that can think of itself as different from “whales, grizzly bears, whole rainforest ecosystems [no less!], mountains and rivers, the tiniest microbes in the soil, and so on”? Is it not indispensable, in fact, for the individual self to disengage itself from a pharaonic “Self,” discover its own capacities and uniqueness, indeed acquire a sense of personality, of self-control and self-direction — all traits indispensable for the achievement of freedom? Here, I may add, Heidegger and, yes, Nazism begin to grimace with satisfaction behind this veil of self-effacement and a passive personality so yielding that it can easily be shaped, distorted, and manipulated by a new “ecological” State machine with a supreme “SELF” embodied in a Leader, Guru, or Living God — all in the name of a “biocentric equality” that is slowly reworked as it has been so often in history into a social hierarchy. From Shaman to Monarch, from Priest or Priestess to Dictator, our warped social development has been marked by nature worshippers and their ritual Supreme Ones who produced unfinished individuals at best and who deindividuated the “self-in-Self” at worst, often in the name of the “Great Connected Whole” (to use exactly the language of the Chinese ruling classes who kept their peasantry in abject servitude, as Leon E. Stover points out in his The Cultural Ecology of Chinese Civilization).

What makes this Eco-la-la especially sinister today is that we are already living in a period of massive deindividuation — not because deep ecology or Taoism is making any serious inroads into our own cultural ecology but because the mass media, the commodity culture, and a market society are “reconnecting” us into an increasingly depersonalized “whole” whose essence is passivity and a chronic vulnerability to economic and political manipulation. It is not from an excess of selfhood that we are suffering but of selfishness — the surrender of personality to the security afforded by corporations, centralized government, and the military. If selfhood is identified with a grasping, “anthropocentric,” and devouring personality, these traits are to be found not so much among ordinary people, who basically sense that they have no control over their destinies, as among the giant corporations and State leaders who are plundering not only the planet but also women, people of color, and the underprivileged. It is not deindividuation that the oppressed of the world require, much less passive personalities that readily surrender

themselves to the cosmic forces — the "Self" Ðthat buffet them around, but reindividuation that will render them active agents in remaking society and arresting the growing totalitarianism that threatens to homogenize us all as part of a Western version of the "Great Connected Whole."

We are also confronted with the delicious "and so on" that follows the "tiniest microbes in the soil" with which our deep ecologists identify the "Self." Here we encounter another bit of intellectual manipulation that marks the Devall-Sessions anthology as a whole: the tendency to choose examples from God-Motherhood-and Flag for one's own case and cast any other alternative vision in a demonic form. Why stop with the "tiniest microbes in the soil" and ignore the leprosy microbe, or the yearning and striving viruses that give us smallpox, polio, and more recently AIDS? Are they too not part of "all organisms and entities in the ecosphere … of the interrelated whole … equal in intrinsic worth," as Devall and Sessions remind us in their effluvium of Eco-la-la? At which point, Naess, Devall, and Sessions immediately introduce a number of highly debatable qualifiers, i.e., "we should live with a minimum rather than a maximum impact on other species" (75) or "we have no right to destroy other living beings without sufficient reason" (75) or finally, even more majestically, "The slogan of Ônoninterference' does not imply that humans should not modify [!] some [!] ecosystems as do other [!] species. Humans have modified the earth and will probably [!] continue to do so. At issue is the nature [!] and extent [!] of such interference [!]" (72).

One does not leave the muck of deep ecology without having mud all over one's feet. Exactly who is to decide the nature of human "interference" in first nature and the extent to which it can be done? What are "some" of the ecosystems we can modify, and which ones are not subject to human "interference"? Here again we encounter the key problem that Eco-la-la, including deep ecology, poses for serious, ecologically concerned people: the social bases of our ecological problems and the role of the human species in the evolutionary scheme of things.

Implicit in deep ecology is the notion that a "humanity" exists that accurses the natural world; that individual selfhood must be transformed into a cosmic "Selfhood" that essentially transcends the person and his or her uniqueness. Even nature is not spared a kind of static, prepositional logic that is cultivated by the logical positivists. Nature in deep ecology and David Foreman's interpretation of it becomes a kind of scenic view, a spectacle to be admired around the campfire (perhaps with some Budweiser beer to keep the boys happy or a Marlboro cigarette to keep them manly) — not an evolutionary development that is cumulative and includes the human species, its conceptual powers of thought, its highly symbolic forms of communication, and graded into second nature, a social and cultural development that has its own history and metabolism with pristine first nature. To see nature as a cumulative unfolding form first into second nature is likely to be condemned as anthropocentric — as though human self-consciousness at its best were not nature rendered self-conscious.

The problems that deep ecology and biocentrism raise have not gone unnoticed in more thoughtful press in England. During a discussion of "biocentric ethics" in The New Scientist 69 (1976), for example, Bernard Dixon observed that no "logical line can be drawn" between the conservation of whales, gentians, and flamingoes on the one hand and the extinction of pathogenic microbes like the small pox virus on the other. At which point God's gift to misanthropy, David Ehrenfeld, cutely observes that the smallpox virus is an "endangered species" in his The Arrogance of Humanism, a work that is so selective and tendentious in its use of quotations that it should validly be renamed "The Arrogance of Ignorance." One wonders what to do about the AIDS virus if a vaccine or therapy should threaten its survival. Further, given

the passion for perpetuating the ecosystem of every species, one wonders how smallpox and AIDS virus should be preserved. In test tubes? Laboratory cultures? Or to be truly ecological, in their native habitat, the human body? In which case, idealistic acolytes of deep ecology should be invited to offer their own bloodstreams in the interests of "biocentric equality." Certainly, if "nature should be permitted to take its course," as Foreman advises for Ethiopians and Indian peasants, then plagues, famines, suffering, wars, and perhaps even lethal asteroids of the kind that exterminated the great reptiles of the Mesozoic should not be kept from defacing the purity of first nature by the intervention of second nature. With so much absurdity to unscramble, one can indeed get heady, almost dizzy, with a sense of polemical intoxication.

At root, the eclecticism that turns deep ecology into a goulash of notions and moods is insufferably reformist and surprisingly environmentalist — all its condemnations of "superficial ecology" aside. It has a Dunkin' Donut for everyone. Are you, perhaps a mild-mannered liberal? Then do not fear: Devall and Sessions give a patronizing nod to "reform legislation," "coalitions," "protests," the "women's movement" (this earns all of ten lines in their "Minority Tradition and Direct Action" essay), "working in the Christian tradition," "questioning technology" (a hammering remark if ever there was one), "working in Green politics" (which faction, the Fundis or the Realos?) — in short, everything can be expected in so "cosmic" a philosophy. Anything seems to pass through deep ecology's Dunkin Donut hole: anarchism at one extreme and eco-fascism at the other. Like the fast-food emporiums that make up our culture, deep ecology is the fast food of quasi-radical environmentalists.

Despite its pretense of radicality, deep ecology is more New Age and Aquarian than the environmentalist movements it denounces under these names. If "to study the self is to forget the self," to cite a Taoist passage with which Devall and Sessions regale us, then the "all" by which we are presumably "enlightened" is even more invertebrate than Teilhard de Chardin, whose Christian mysticism earns so much scorn from the authors of Deep Ecology. Indeed, the extent to which deep ecology accommodates itself to some of the worst features of the dominant view it professes to reject is seen with extraordinary clarity in one of its most fundamental and repeatedly asserted demands: namely, that the world's population must be drastically reduced, according to one of its acolytes, to 500 million. If deep ecologists have even the faintest knowledge of the population theorists that Devall and Sessions invoke with admiration — notably Thomas Malthus, William Vogt, and Paul Ehrlich — then they would be obliged to add: by measures that are virtually eco-fascist. This specter clearly looms before us in Devall and Sessions's sinister remark: "the longer we wait [in population control] the more drastic will be the measures needed" (72).

The Deep Malthusians

The population issue — which occupies a central place in the crude biologism promoted by Devall and Sessions — has a long and complex pedigree and one that radically challenges deep ecologists' very way of thinking about social problems, not to speak of their way of resolving them. The woefully brief history that Devall and Sessions give us of the population issue on page 46 of their book would be considered embarrassing in its simplemindedness were it not so reactionary in its thrust.

Thomas Malthus (1766–1854) is hailed as a prophet whose warning "that human population growth would exponentially outstrip food production … was ignored by the rising tide of indus-

trial/technological optimism." This statement is pure hogwash — what Devall and Sessions call the "rising tide of industrial/technological optimism" was in fact the nineteenth-century radicals who opposed the vicious abuses inflicted by industrial capitalism on the oppressed of the world, often in the name of Malthusianism. Devall and Sessions thereupon extol William Catton, Jr., for applying "the ecological concept of carrying capacity" for an ecosystem (I used this expression years before Catton in my mid-1960s writings on social ecology, albeit for very different purposes than Catton's), and George Perkins Marsh for warning that "modern man's impact on the environment could result in rising species extinction rates" (by no means a novel notion when the passenger pigeon and bison were facing extinction, as everyone knew at the time). Devall and Sessions finally land on all fours: "The environmental crisis," we are solemnly told, "was further articulated by ecologist William Vogt (Road to Survival, 1948), anticipating the work of radical [!] ecologist Paul Ehrlich in the 1960s."

Devall and Sessions often write with smug assurance on issues that they know virtually nothing about. This is most notably the case in the so-called "population debate," a debate that has raged for over two hundred years — and one that involves explosive political and social issues that have pitted the most reactionary elements in English and American society (generally represented by Malthus, Vogt, and Ehrlich) against authentic radicals who have called for basic changes in the structure of society. In fact, the Eco-la-la that Devall and Sessions dump on us in only two paragraphs would require a full-size volume of careful analysis to unravel.

First of all, Thomas Malthus was not a prophet; he was an apologist for the misery that the Industrial Revolution was inflicting on the English peasantry and working classes. His utterly fallacious argument that population increases exponentially while food supplies increase arithmetically was not ignored by England's ruling classes; it was taken to heart and even incorporated into social Darwinism as an explanation for why oppression was a necessary feature of society and for why rich, white imperialists and the privileged were the "fittest" who were equipped to "survive" — needless to say, at the expense of the impoverished many. Written and directed in great part as an attack upon the liberatory vision of William Godwin, Malthus's mean-spirited Essay on the Principle of Population tried to demonstrate that hunger, poverty, disease, and premature death are inevitable precisely because population and food supply increase at different rates. Hence war, famines, and plagues (Malthus later added "moral restraint") were necessary to keep population down — needless to say, among the "lower orders of society," whom he singled out as the chief offenders of his inexorable population "laws." (See Chapter 5 of his Essay, which for all its "concern" over the misery of the "lower classes" inveighs against the Poor Laws and argues that the "pressures of distress on this part of the community is an evil so deeply seated that no human ingenuity can reach it.") Malthus, in effect, became the ideologue par excellence for the land-grabbing English nobility, in its effort to dispossess the peasantry of their traditional common lands, and for English capitalists, in their efforts to work children, women, and men to death in the newly emerging "industrial/technological" factory system.

Malthusianism contributed in great part to that meanness of spirit that Charles Dickens captured in his famous novels Oliver Twist and Hard Times. The doctrine, its author, and its overstuffed wealthy beneficiaries were bitterly fought by the great English anarchist William Godwin, the pioneering socialist Robert Own, and the emerging Chartist movement of the English workers in the early nineteenth century. When the "rising tide of industrial /technological optimism" proved that Malthus was sucking his ideas out of this thumb and his mutton — indeed, when improved economic conditions revealed that population growth tends to diminish with improve-

ments in the quality of life and the status of women — Malthusianism was naively picked up by Charles Darwin to explain his theory of natural selection. It now became the bedrock theory for the new social Darwinism, so very much in vogue in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, that saw society as a "jungle" in which only the fit (usually the rich and white) could survive at the expense of the "unfit" (usually the poor and people of color). Malthus, in effect, had provided an ideology that justified class domination, racism, the degradation of women, and ultimately the empire-building of English imperialism, later to phase into German fascism, with its use of industrial techniques for mass murder.

All of this occurred long after the English ruling classes, overstuffed on a diet of Malthusian pap, deliberately permitted vast numbers of Irish peasants to starve to death in the potato "famines" of the 1840s on the strength of the Malthusian notion that "nature should be permitted to take its course.

Malthusianism was not only to flourish in Hitler's Third Reich; it was to be revived again in the late 1940s, following the discoveries of antibiotics to control infectious diseases. Riding on the tide of the new Pax Americana after World War II, William F. Vogt and a whole bouquet of neo-Malthusians challenged the use of the new antibiotic discoveries to control disease and prevent death — as usual, mainly in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Again, a new population debate erupted, with the Rockefeller interests and large corporate sharks aligning themselves with the neo-Malthusians and caring people of every sort aligning themselves with Third World theorists like Josua de Castro, who wrote damning, highly informed critiques of this new version of misanthropy.

Paul Ehrlich and his rambunctious Zero Population Growth fanatics in the early 1970s literally polluted the environmental movement with demands for a government bureau (no less!) to "control" population, advancing the infamous triage ethic as a standard for aiding or refusing to aid so-called "undeveloped" countries. The extent to which this ethic became a formula for dispensing food to countries that aligned themselves with the United States in the cold war and for refusing aid to those that were nonaligned would make an interesting story by itself. Ehrlich, in turn, began to backtrack on his attempts to peddle a 1970s version of neo-Malthusianism — perhaps until recently, when deep ecology has singled him out for a prophetic place in the pantheon of "radical" ecology. Rumor has it that black students in Ehrlich's own academic backyard viewed his Population Bomb as basically racist and neatly tailored to American imperialism.

In any case, it is a novelty to learn that Ehrlich is to be regarded as a "radical" and that "antireformists" like Devall and Sessions are splashing around in the cesspool of Malthusianism — as do many people who innocently call themselves deep ecologists. One wonders if they realize how reactionary a role this doctrine has played over the centuries.

In Food First, Francis Moore Lappé and Joseph Collins did a superb job in showing how hunger has its origins not in "natural "shortages of food or population growth but in social and cultural dislocations. (It is notable that Devall and Sessions do not list this excellent book in their bibliography.) The book has to be read to understand the reactionary implications of deep ecology's demographic positions.

What is no less important: demography is a highly ambiguous and ideologically charged social discipline that cannot be reduced to a mere numbers game in biological reproduction. Human beings are not fruit flies (the species of choice that the neo-Malthusians love to cite). Their reproductive behavior is profoundly conditioned by cultural values, standards of living, social traditions, the status of women, religious beliefs, socio-political conflicts, and various socio-political

expectations. Smash up a stable precapitalist culture and throw its people off the land into city slums, and due ironically to demoralization, population may soar rather than decline. As Gandhi told the British, imperialism left India's wretched poor and homeless with little more in life than the immediate gratification provided by sex and an understandably numbed sense of personal, much less social, responsibility. Reduce women to mere reproductive factories, and population rates will explode.

Conversely, provide people with decent lives, education, a sense of creative meaning in life, and above all free women from their roles as mere bearers of children — and population growth begins to stabilize and population rates even reverse their direction. Indeed, population growth and attitudes toward population vary from society to society according to the way people live, the ideas they hold, and the socio-economic relationships they establish. Nothing more clearly reveals deep ecology's crude, often reactionary, and certainly superficial ideological framework — all its decentralist, antihierarchical, and "radical" rhetoric aside — than its suffocating biological treatment of the population issue and its inclusion of Malthus, Vogt, and Ehrlich in its firmament of prophets.

The close connection between social factors and demography is perhaps best illustrated by the fact that throughout most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Europe, improved living conditions reduced rates of population increase, in some cases leading to negative population growth rates. During the interwar period, such declines became so "serious" to countries readying themselves for World War II that women were granted awards for having sizable numbers of children (read: cannon fodder for the military). More recently in Japan, industrialists were so alarmed by the decline in the country's labor force due to the legalization of abortion that they demanded the abrogation of this legislation.

These examples can be generalized into a theory of demography in which the need for labor often plays a more important role historically in population fluctuations than biological behavior and sexual desire. If women are seen as female fruit flies and men as their mindless partners, guided more by instinct than the quality of life, then Devall and Sessions have an argument — and almost certainly a crude patronizing gender-conditioned outlook that requires careful scrutiny by feminists who profess to be deep ecologists. If people are not fruit flies, then deep ecology reeks of crude biologism that is matched only by its na•ve reading of Malthus and company.

Not surprisingly, Earth First!, whose editor professes to be an enthusiastic deep ecologist, carried an article entitled "Population and AIDS" that advanced the obscene argument that AIDS is desirable as a means of population control. This was no spoof. It was carefully worked out, fully reasoned in a Paleolithic sort of way, and earnestly argued. Not only will AIDS claim large numbers of lives, asserts the author (who hides behind the pseudonym "Miss Ann Thropy," a form of black humor that could also pass as an example of macho-male arrogance), but it "may cause a breakdown in technology [read: human food supply] and its export which could also decrease human population" (May 1, 1987). These people feed on human disasters, suffering, and misery, preferably in Third World countries where AIDS is by far a more monstrous problem than elsewhere.

Until we can smoke out "Miss Ann Thropy" (is it David Foreman again?), we have little reason do doubt that this mentality — or lack thereof — is perfectly consistent with the "more drastic … measures" that Devall and Sessions belief we will have to explore. Nor is it inconsistent with a Malthus and Vogt, possibly even an Ehrlich, that we should make no effort to find a cure for this disease which may do so much to depopulate the world. "Biocentric democracy," I assume,

should call for nothing less than a hands-off policy on the AIDS virus and perhaps equally lethal pathogens that appear in the human species.

What Is Social Ecology?

Social ecology is neither deep, tall, fat, nor thick. It is social. It does not fall back on incantations, sutras, flow diagrams, or spiritual vagaries. It is avowedly rational. It does not try to regale metaphorical forms of spiritual mechanism and crude biologism with Taoist, Buddhist, Christian, or shamanistic Eco-la-la. It is a coherent form of naturalism that looks to evolution and the biosphere, not to deities in the sky or under the earth for quasi-religious and supernaturalistic explanations of natural and social phenomena.

Philosophically, social ecology stems from a solid organismic tradition in Western philosophy, beginning with Heraclitus, the near-evolutionary dialectic of Aristotle and Hegel, and the superbly critical approach o the famous Frankfurt School — particularly its devastating critique of logical positivism (which surfaces in Naess repeatedly), and the primitivistic mysticism of Heidegger (which pops up all over the place in deep ecology's literature).

Socially, it is revolutionary, not merely radical. It critically unmasks the entire evolution of hierarchy in all its forms, including neo-Malthusian elitism, the eco-brutalism of David Foreman, the antihumanism of David Ehrenfeld and "Miss Ann Thropy," and the latent racism, First World arrogance, and Yuppie nihilism of postmodernistic spiritualism. It is rooted in the profound eco-anarchistic analyses of Peter Kropotkin, the radical economic insights of Karl Marx, the emancipatory promise of the revolutionary Enlightenment as articulated by the great encyclopedist Denis Diderot, the enragŽs of the French Revolution, the revolutionary feminist ideals of Louise Michel and Emma Goldman, the communitarian visions of Paul Goodman and E. A. Gutkind, and the various ecorevoluitionary manifestos of the early 1960s.

Politically it is Green, and radically Green, It takes its stand with the left-wing tendencies of the German Greens and extraparliamentary street movements of Europe n cities, with the American radical ecofeminist movement that is currently emerging, with the demands for a new politics based on citizens' initiatives, neighborhood assemblies, New England's tradition of town meetings, with unaligned anti-imperialist movements at home and abroad, with the struggle by people of color for complete freedom from domination by privileged whites and from superpowers on both sides of the iron curtain.

Morally, it is avowedly humanistic in the high Renaissance meaning of the word, not the degraded meaning of humanism that has been imparted by Foreman, Ehrenfeld, a salad of academic deep ecologists, and the like. Humanism from its inception has meant a shift in vision from the skies to the earth, from superstition to reason, from deities to people — who are no less products of natural evolution than grizzly bears and whales. Social ecology rejects a "biocentrism" that essentially denies or degrades the uniqueness of human beings, human subjectivity, rationality, aesthetic sensibility, and the ethical potentiality of this extraordinary species. By the same token, it rejects an "anthropocentrism" that confers on the privileged few the right to plunder the world of life, including women, the young, the poor, and the underprivileged. Indeed, it opposes "centrism" of any kind as a new word for hierarchy and domination — be it that of nature by a mystical "man" or the domination of people by an equally mystical "nature." It firmly denies that nature is a scenic view that mountain men like Foreman survey from a peak in Nevada or a picture

window that spoiled Yuppies place in their ticky-tacky country homes. To social ecology, nature is natural evolution, not a cosmic arrangement of beings frozen in a moment of eternity to be abjectly revered, adored, and worshiped like the gods and goddesses that priests and priestesses place above us in a realm of supernature that subverts the naturalistic integrity of an authentic ecology. Natural evolution is nature in the very real sense that it is composed of atoms, molecules that have evolved into amino acids, proteins, unicellular organisms, genetic codes, invertebrates and vertebrates, amphibians, reptiles, mammals, primates, and human beings — all in a cumulative thrust toward ever greater complexity, ever greater subjectivity, and finally ever-greater mind with a capacity for conceptual thought, symbolic communication of the most sophisticated kinds, and self-consciousness in which natural evolution knows itself purposively and willfully.

This marvel we call "nature" has produced a marvel we call homo sapiens — thinking man, and more significantly for the development of society, thinking woman, whose primeval domestic domain provided the arena for the origins of a caring society, human empathy, love, and idealistic commitment. The human species, in effect, is no less a product of natural evolution that blue-green algae. To degrade that species in the name of antihumanism as Miss Ann Thropy has done (using the coarse language of an unknown Earth First! mountain man), to deny the species its uniqueness as thinking beings with an unprecedented gift for conceptual thought, is to deny the rich fecundity of natural evolution itself. To separate human beings and society from nature is to dualize and truncate nature itself, to diminish the meaning and thrust of natural evolution in the name of a "biocentrism" that spends more time disporting itself with mantras, deities, and supernature than with the realities of the biosphere and the role of society in ecological problems. Accordingly, social ecology does not try to hide its critical and reconstructive thrust in metaphors. It calls "technological/industrial" society capitalism, placing the onus of our ecological problems on the living sources and social relationships that produce them, not on a cutesy "Third Wave" abstraction that buries these sources in technics, a technical mentality, or perhaps the technicians who work on machines. Its sees the domination of women not simply as a spiritual problem that can be resolved by rituals, incantations, and shamanesses (important as ritual may be in solidarizing women into a unique community of people) but in the long, highly graded, and subtly nuanced development of hierarchy, which long preceded the development of classes. Nor does it ignore class, ethnic differences, imperialism, and oppression by creating a grab bag called Humanity that is placed in opposition to a mystified Nature, divested of all development.

All of which brings us as social ecologists to an issue that seems to be totally alien to the crude concerns of deep ecology: natural evolution has conferred on human beings the capacity to form a second (or cultural) nature out of first (or primeval) nature. Natural evolution has not only provided humans with ability but also with the necessity to be purposive interveners into first nature, to consciously change first nature by means of a highly institutionalized form of community. It is not alien to natural evolution that over billions of years the human species has emerged, capable of thinking in a sophisticated way. Nor is it alien for that species to develop a highly sophisticated form of symbolic communication or that a new kind of community — institutionalized, guided by thought rather than by instinct alone, and ever changing — has emerged called society.

Taken together, all of these human traits — intellectual, communicative, and social — have not only emerged from natural evolution and are inherently human; they can also be placed at the service of natural evolution to consciously increase biotic diversity, diminish suffering, foster the

further evolution of new an ecologically valuable life-forms, and reduce the impact of disastrous accidents or the harsh effects of mere change.

Whether this species, gifted by the creativity of natural evolution, can play the role of a nature rendered self-conscious or cut against the grain of natural evolution by simplifying the biosphere, polluting it, and undermining the cumulative results of organic evolution is above all a social problem. The primary question ecology faces today is whether an ecologically oriented society can be created out of the present anti-ecological one.

Deep ecology provides is with no approach for responding to, much less acting upon, this key question. It not only rips invaluable ideas like decentralization, a nonhierarchical society, local autonomy, mutual aid, and communalism from the liberatory anarchic tradition of the past where they have acquired a richly nuanced, anti-elitist , and egalitarian content — reinforced by passionate struggles by millions of men and women for freedom. It reduces them to bumper-sticker slogans that can be recycled for use by a macho mountain man like Foreman at one extreme or flaky spiritualists at the other. These bumper-sticker slogans are then relocated in a particularly repulsive context whose contours are defined by Malthusian elitism, antihumanist misanthropy, and a seemingly benign "biocentrism" that dissolves humanity with all its unique natural traits for conceptual thought and self-consciousness into a "biocentric democracy" that is more properly the product of human consciousness than a natural reality. Carried to its logical absurdity, this "biocentric democracy" — one might also speak of a tree's morality or a leopard's social contract with its prey — can no more deny the right of pathogenic viruses to be placed in an Endangered Species list (and who places them there in the first place?) than it can deny the same status to whales. The social roots of the ecological crisis are layered over with a hybridized, often self-contradictory spirituality in which the human self, writ large, is projected into the environment or into the sky as a reified deity or deities — a piece of anthropocentrism if ever there was one, like the shamans dressed in reindeer skins and horns — and abjectly revered as "nature." Or as Arne Naess, the grand pontiff of this mess, puts it: "The basic principles within the deep ecology movement are grounded in religion or philosophy" (225) — as though the two words can be flippantly used interchangeably. Selfhood is dissolved, in turn, into a cosmic "Self" precisely at a time when deindividuation and passivity are being cultivated by the mass media, corporations, and the State to an appalling extent. Finally, deep ecology, with its concern for the manipulation of nature, exhibits very little concern for the manipulation of human beings by one another, except perhaps when it comes to the drastic measures that may be "needed" for "population control."

Unless there is a resolute attempt to fully anchor ecological dislocation in social dislocations, to challenge the vested corporate and political interests known as capitalist society — not some vague "industrial/technological" society that even Dwight D. Eisenhower attacked with a more acerbic term — to analyze, explore and attack hierarchy as a reality, not only as a sensibility, to recognize the material needs of the poor and of Third World people, to function politically, not simply as a religious cult, to give the human species and mind their due in natural evolution, not simply to regard them as cancers in the biosphere, to examine economies as well as souls and freedom as well as immerse ourselves in introspective or scholastic arguments about the rights of pathogenic viruses — unless in short North American Greens and the ecology movement shift their focus toward a social ecology and let deep ecology sink into the pit it has created, the ecology movement will become another ugly wart on the skin of society.

What we must do today is return to nature, conceived in all its fecundity, richness of potentialities, and subjectivity — not to supernature with its shamans, priests, priestesses, and fanciful deities that are merely anthropomorphic extensions and distortions of the human as all-embracing divinities. And what we must enchant is not only an abstract nature that often reflects our own systems of power, hierarchy, and domination, but rather human beings, the human mind, and the human spirit that has taken such a beating these days from every source, particularly deep ecology.

Deep ecology, with its Malthusian thrust, its various centricities, its mystifying Eco-la-la, and its disorienting eclecticism degrades this enterprise into a crude biologism that deflects us from the social problems that underpin the ecological ones and the project of social reconstruction that alone can spare the biosphere from virtual destruction.

We must finally take a stand on these issues — free of all Eco-la-la — or acknowledge that the academy has made another conquest: namely that of the ecology movement itself.

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